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Religious-ed program helps children with disabilities

By Christine Williams

BEDFORD — Like other children, the small group of boys who meet at St. Michael Parish in Bedford each Sunday morning for religious education learn how to make the sign of the cross, pray the Hail Mary and receive Jesus in the Eucharist.

These common milestones for Catholic children are celebrated accomplishments for those six boys who all have developmental disorders. Three are autistic, two are developmentally delayed and one is mentally challenged.

Patricia Marks, the director of religious education at St. Michael's, started the program four years ago at the request of a parent who wanted her son to receive the sacraments like his brother and sister. With the help of materials from Cathy Boyle, who runs a similar program at St. Mary Parish in Winchester, Marks created a program that has allowed children with developmental disorders to participate more fully at Mass, and four of those children received first Communion last Easter.

The students meet for 45 minutes at the same time as other religious education classes. Each class begins by taking attendance on a board at the front of the class. One-by-one students are asked to come forward and place their picture next to a picture of Jesus and a heart to show that Jesus loves them.

All of the materials for the class are visual and repetitious, which makes it easier for the students to learn. Prayers are kept short and simple so that they can understand and remember them.

In a typical class, one of the three alternating teachers begins instruction with a story from the Bible, telling the story and showing it with pictures. The theme learned in the story is reiterated through an arts and crafts time where the students make things to take home with them that related to the lesson. Each student is assigned a high school volunteer to give them one-on-one attention and help them through the class.

Max Hurley-Dorof, a 17-year-old parishioner and student at Bedford High School, said that he became involved after hearing about how much fun his brother had volunteering for the program. He enjoys working with his student and building a friendship based on trust. He said he has been inspired to work with children with special needs through a program at his high school.

Corine Weeks, 16, also a parishioner and Bedford High Student, said she likes to make learning fun for the students and finds the program fulfilling.

"Each week you come back and see them progress," said Corine.

The class ends with a song and time to share the project as well as what was learned. The students also have special materials to take home and study. All of them have a Mass book that includes illustrated instructions on how to do everything from blessing themselves to receiving Communion.



Mary Galipeau leads a religious education class for children with developmental disorders at St. Michael Parish in Bedford earlier this year. Patricia Marks, director of religious education was named a 2006 Distinguished Citizen by The Arc of Massachusetts for developing the program. Pilot photo/courtesy Mary McCarthy

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Each year the students learn a prayer and take home a book with illustrations and explanations that make the prayer understandable.

This year they learned the Hail Mary. The book begins by explaining that "Hail Mary" means "Hello Mary" and that "full of grace" means that "God makes Mary special."

Programs like this only exist in a few locations in Massachusetts, and parents face limited resources when they seek to raise their children with developmental disabilities in the faith.

Marks was honored for the program this year when named a 2006 Distinguished Citizen by The Arc of Massachusetts, a grass-roots organization which supports people with cognitive and developmental disabilities and their families.

"I was truly humbled, and I was honored," Marks said of the award.

"When you love what you do, when you're blessed, it just comes naturally," she said. "You have a love for Jesus that you want to share."

Marks was also quick to add that the success of the program is due to teamwork and the help of many others.

Mary Galipeau, one of the program's teachers, said that the class is a lot of work but very worthwhile.

"Some days you may plan something really fantastic, and it's not going to happen. You have to go with the flow," she said, adding "You leave every Sunday feeling great. You have so much joy in your heart."

Three years of the program have led to four of the children receiving first Communion, a day that all involved with the program remember fondly.

"I cried on that day," said Marks. "It's a moment that will always be with you the rest of your life."

Those children have continued to receive the Eucharist with their families each Sunday, and by a gift of the Holy Spirit they understand that they are receiving Jesus, Marks said.

"They take, they eat, and they bless themselves," she said. "They're very much a part of our worshipping community," which is something that many of their parents were not sure would happen, she added.

In fact, before the program started many of those children were not able to get through an entire Mass.

Ann Guay, the parishioner who nominated Marks for the honor, said that her middle child, Brian, who is autistic, could not participate fully in Mass or religious education prior to Mark's program. Although he and other students like him are welcome at St. Michael's religious education, he could not receive the support necessary for him to truly understand the lessons.

"Brian's autism made it difficult for him to attend Mass, and frankly, we were apprehensive," she said.

Now, Brian looks forward to the program, attends Mass weekly with the rest of the family and says the Lord's prayer every night before bed.

"He has a fuller life because he's able to participate in everything St. Michael's has to offer," she said.

Mary McCarthy, a parishioner at St. Michael's and mother of two, said she admires the families involved in the program.

"I really admire the parents of the children and how they cope because it's definitely not an easy road for them," she said.

McCarthy, who has helped put together some of the materials for the program, said that many of the people involved in the program have no formal training in working with students with special needs.

"They do it out of love," she said. "It's amazing to see what a small group of people can do when they come together and have that passion. It's contagious."

